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SUBJECT: PM ABHISIT AT THE ONE-YEAR MARK: A MOSTLY POSITIVE
POLITICAL REPORT CARD

REF: A. BANGKOK 3283 (A TOUGH YEAR)
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 3129 (WEAPONS SEIZURE)
[1](#)C. BANGKOK 3067 (RED SHIRTS SET THEIR SIGHTS)
[1](#)D. BANGKOK 287 (THAKSIN STICKS FOOT IN MOUTH)
[1](#)E. BANGKOK 2723 (ASEAN ROUNDUP)
[1](#)F. BANGKOK 2587 (NEWIN,S FIEFDOM)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) One-year into his term as Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva has lasted in office far longer than most political prognosticators ever thought possible. Through this sheer act of survival in the rough and tumble world of Thai politics, he has confounded his detractors and rebutted -- in the most effective way possible -- those who disparaged his political instincts and discounted his mettle. Remaining on top has come at a price, however, as Abhisit has had to expend considerable energy tending to his fractious party, appeasing rapacious coalition partners, and counteracting a relentless opposition, an exhaustive undertaking that at times has compromised Abhisit's ability to focus on carrying out his agenda. As a result, the PM's overall political report card for his first year was somewhat mixed, with his high marks for efforts with Burma, Thailand's initiatives as ASEAN Chair, the North Korean weapons seizure, and aspirations for peace in the south outweighing the less stellar ones for his management of relations with Cambodia, the Lao Hmong repatriation, failing to deliver on southern reconciliation efforts, and his inability to break Thailand's debilitating political logjam. This is one of two cables examining PM Abhisit's first year in office; REF A explored his economic achievements.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: As the PM evaluates his first year in office, he can take some comfort in knowing that his political future is in many ways more secure than when he first assumed office. There are clouds on the horizon to be sure, including a likely January no-confidence vote in Parliament and the prospect of more energized red-shirt protests in the New Year, but Thaksin's recent political missteps (REF D) and

Puea Thai's decision to drop its support for the constitutional reform effort means there is neither an obvious trigger for elections in the near future, nor a huge outcry for them. In fact, it is no longer outlandish to suggest that Abhisit could manage to stick it out until close to the natural expiration of his term in December 2011, a notion that would have seemed laughable just months ago.

¶3. (C) Comment cont'd: From a USG perspective, on balance the PM has been a reliable partner and has delivered a level of stability -- lacking since the 2006 coup -- that has allowed many of our bilateral initiatives to get back on track and close to where they stood pre-coup. While there have been exceptions to this rule -- most notably in the form of last week's Lao Hmong repatriation -- U.S.-Thai relations have largely been well served during this administration and we suspect that will continue to be the case as long as PM Abhisit remains in power.

POLITICAL GROUNDHOG'S DAY

¶4. (C) One-year into his term, Prime Minister Abhisit has had little success translating his eloquent words about political reconciliation into concrete action. Public opinion polls have consistently shown that the Thai people are more interested in progress on political reconciliation than just about any other issue save the economy, and yet the PM has failed to change the underlying political dynamic in any appreciable way. Red-shirts still take to the streets with regularity to protest the government, while the yellow shirts wait in the wings, ever ready to assemble at the slightest provocation. The PM has freely admitted that he has failed to address the issue, telling a reporter on December 21 that

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he had been "unable to tackle the political crisis."

¶5. (C) Of course, PM Abhisit does not have the capacity to engineer reconciliation on his own. Former Prime Minister Thaksin, like PM Abhisit, has also repeatedly paid lip service to the idea of reconciliation, though his actions have mostly suggested he is more interested in toppling the Prime Minister. From his revolutionary rhetoric and tacit support for violence in April, to his Times Online interview and most recently his Cambodia gambit, Thaksin's actions have consistently exposed his words about reconciliation as hollow.

KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE AND COALITION PARTNERS CLOSER

¶6. (C) Aside from the never-ending political chess match with Thaksin and his allies, one of the most consistent irritants for PM Abhisit has been coalition management in general, and the Phumjai Thai party in particular. As reported in REF F and elsewhere, godfather of the Phumjai Thai party Newin Chidchop has milked Phumjai Thai's Kingmaking role in the coalition for all that it's worth. Phumjai Thai controls the Ministries of Interior, Commerce, and Transport, and at times has treated these ministries like bureaucratic ATM machines.

¶7. (C) The level of corruption in Phumjai Thai's bureaus has been significant enough -- even by Thai standards -- to raise eyebrows and partially sully the Prime Minister by association. As Deputy House Speaker Apiwan Wiriyaichai told us December 22, no one questioned Prime Minister Abhisit's credentials as a clean reformer. According to Deputy Speaker Apiwan, the problem was that PM Abhisit and the Democrats made a Faustian pact with Phumjai Thai to form the government, and there was very little the PM could do to rein in Newin's wheeling and dealing. Apiwan noted that Phumjai Thai held all the cards, as any concerted effort by the PM or the Democrats to bring Phumjai Thai to heel could cause irreversible damage to the already fragile coalition.

18. (C) Despite all the headaches associated with managing Phumjai Thai, the coalition appears to be on reasonably solid footing moving into year two of the Abhisit administration. Deputy Government Spokesman and Phumjai Thai stalwart Suphachai Jaismut has told us repeatedly that although Phumjai Thai was not always satisfied with PM Abhisit's leadership, overall the party was eager to maintain the status quo for as long as possible. The same could be said for the Chart Thai Pattana party, the fourth largest party in the coalition. Chart Thai Pattana MPs frequently disparage PM Abhisit and the Democrats on one hand, while conceding they have no interest in new elections on the other. Chart Thai Pattana MP Chada Thaiset's comments to us December 8 reflected this dynamic. Chada told us that PM Abhisit failed to do the dirty work necessary to keep the coalition running smoothly and that the Democrats were unpleasant to work with. Yet, when we asked him if he thought the coalition was in danger of fragmenting, he told us he did not think so and that he wanted to see the coalition stay together.

BURMA

19. (C) By most measures, Thailand acquitted itself favorably on the Burma issue during PM Abhisit's first year in office. He set a positive tone from the start, beginning with the February lead-up to the ASEAN Summit when he met with Burmese exiles and a group of 1990 Burmese MPs-elect. He has also repeatedly delayed his plans for an official visit to Burma pending the regime's willingness to authorize a meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), and instructed the Thai Embassy in Rangoon to engage more energetically in Rangoon with the opposition NLD party. Perhaps most importantly, Thailand demonstrated leadership on Burma policy as ASEAN Chair, repeatedly pressing reluctant/recalcitrant members on issues such as ASSK's release from prison.

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ASEAN TENURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

110. (C) Regrettably for Thailand, most people will likely remember red-shirts breaching the security at the ASEAN Summit in Pattaya far more readily than other aspects of Thailand's tenure as ASEAN Chair. While there is little question Pattaya represented a low point in the RTG's chairmanship, the fact remains Thailand still managed to carve out a legacy to be proud of on several fronts, including the launch of the ASEAN Charter in February, and its work championing a more aggressive posture on Burma.

111. (C) In October, at the 15th ASEAN Summit in Thailand, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Inter-Governmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), a landmark achievement given ASEAN dynamics and the need for buy-in from "new ASEAN" members Burma, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Though it remains to be seen just how effective the AICHR will prove to be, the very existence of a human rights mechanism within the ASEAN framework represented forward progress and provided a foundation to build upon. Thailand also worked hard to place civil society engagement at the center of its 18 month Chairmanship of ASEAN, going so far as to use the term a "people-centric ASEAN" as one of the themes of its chairmanship. Other RTG initiatives were ASEAN Connectivity, a plan that aims to intensify the idea of a SE Asian community, and the promotion of a defense officials dialogue, specifically in regard to disaster relief and peacekeeping capabilities.

112. (C) Under PM Abhisit's leadership, Thailand announced its candidacy for the United Nations Human Rights Council for the term 2010-2013 and helped spearhead the adoption of the Terms of Reference for the ASEAN Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Women and Children. Thailand also appointed a new slate of commissioners to its national

Human Rights Commission, making it one of only four ASEAN countries to have such a commission. Finally, Thailand positioned itself as a leader on international initiatives to combat violence and discrimination against women, a fact probably best illustrated by the Ministry of Justice and Princess Bajrakitiyabha Mahidol's proposed Draft UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-Custodial Measures for Women Offenders.

NORTH KOREAN WEAPONS SEIZURE

¶13. (C) As reported in REF B, on December 11 Thailand became the first country to successfully carry out an air-related interdiction of North Korean weapons. The RTG seized over 35 tons of North Korean arms in an action that both fulfilled its obligations under UNSCR 1874, while simultaneously underscoring Thailand's invaluable role as a strategic USG partner on bilateral and multilateral issues. Thailand seized the weapons despite an aversion to precedent setting and meddling in the affairs of others.

CAMBODIAN KERFUFFLE

¶14. (C) Relations between Thailand and Cambodia -- typically strained under the best of circumstances -- fell to the newest lows in recent memory under PM Abhisit. Cambodian PM Hun Sen's public embrace of Thaksin triggered a round of harsh back and forth rhetoric between Bangkok and Phnom Penh, retaliatory Ambassadorial withdrawals, and accusations from both sides of meddling in cross border domestic politics.

¶15. (C) While Hun Sen's decision to appoint Thaksin as an advisor was clearly intended as a provocation, it was Abhisit who allowed himself to be manipulated and drawn into a cross border war of words. Notwithstanding the fact that Abhisit received a temporary popularity boost as a result of heightened cross border tensions, the decision to engage with Hun Sen and Thaksin and "wallow in the mud with pigs" as some

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pundits have said, has only served to elevate Thaksin's profile while straining ties with Cambodia at the same time Thailand is navigating complicated relationships with its other neighbors. Thaksin's most recent visit to Cambodia was met with substantially less rancor and acrimony in Thailand, a possible sign that the RTG has recognized the perils of overreacting, but the damage has already been done and Abhisit will be hard pressed to improve relations with Hun Sen anytime soon.

ABHISIT AND THE SOUTH

¶16. (C) When PM Abhisit assumed office just over one year ago, he repeatedly pointed to resolving the southern insurgency as one of his administration's foremost priorities. Right out of the gates, he developed a plan to reinvest civilian officials with authority over the southern insurgency, and considered lifting the draconian security laws that allow security forces to detain and hold suspects without charges or trial. He also launched a "Southern Cabinet" to oversee relevant budget and policy issues, and vowed to establish a new organization with overall responsibility for the south. In addition, the PM signaled he would consider a special administrative zone in southern Thailand to deal with issues of governance, and noted that he would entertain the possibility of "peace talks" to end the violence. Unfortunately, none of Abhisit's initiatives has translated into any visible changes on the ground yet.

JOHN